

Pennsylvania Governor Candidate 'Not Fit for Office'

Former colleagues at the U.S. Army War College add to the criticism of Republican Doug Mastriano.

By Katherine Knott



Doug Mastriano, Republican gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania, has been the subject of criticism over his 2013 dissertation.

Mark Makela/Getty Images

Some retired U.S. Army War College professors are speaking out against Republican Doug Mastriano's controversial bid to

become the next governor of Pennsylvania—a campaign in which Mastriano’s higher education credentials from a Canadian university also have been called into question, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported.

“The officer corps is sworn to defend the Constitution rather than any one person or president,” wrote Tami Davis Biddle, a former professor at the War College, in a column for the Harrisburg newspaper. “None of its members is entitled to toy with insurrection, treat January 6 as legitimate protest, or follow election deniers who would undercut our most important political institutions.”

Biddle wrote that she won’t be voting for Mastriano, a state senator and retired U.S. Army colonel who attended and later taught at the War College, for governor and encouraged others to do the same. She was joined by Rick Coplen, a retired professor who ran for Congress this year but lost his Democratic primary. Coplen told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that Mastriano “is not fit for office.”

“Doug Mastriano is part of this whole effort to, quite frankly, undermine and destroy our democracy,” he said.

A spokesman for Mastriano did not respond to a request for comment.

It’s rare for War College professors to speak out in this way, but the move shows the stakes involved in the race to lead what will be a key swing state in the 2024 presidential election. Mastriano’s campaign

is not only attracting critics from academe, but they are also attacking his academic background.

If elected, Mastriano has said he'll make Pennsylvanians re-register in order to vote and could decertify voting machines, the *Inquirer* reported. As governor, he would have the power to appoint the secretary of state, who oversees elections. He has spread election conspiracy theories on the campaign trail and attended the Jan. 6 rally that preceded the insurrection, though Mastriano maintains he didn't do anything wrong. He's running against state attorney general Josh Shapiro, who leads in the polls.

"Everybody has one thing in common—all are raising serious questions about his integrity," said Jeffrey Brown, an associate professor of history at the University of New Brunswick who has questioned the veracity of Mastriano's 2013 dissertation.

Brown's concerns were not heeded, and he was dropped from the dissertation committee. Mastriano received a Ph.D. in history from the university. Other scholars, including a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma, have continued to question Mastriano's research.

But it's Mastriano's more recent activities that have captured the attention of the War College professors.

Biddle wrote that Mastriano's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election amount to rejecting the oath he swore when he became a military officer. Biddle also criticized Representative Scott

Perry, an ally of former president Trump, who has promoted the lie that Trump won the 2020 election.

“Instead, they align themselves with the MAGA movement’s attack on the democratic institutions that have made our nation productive, stable, secure, and a beacon of hope for the world,” she wrote, adding that both men had “put their personal interests ahead of the nation’s.”

She couldn’t be reached for comment but told the *Inquirer* she felt obligated to speak out.

“I didn’t want to look back on this moment in time and regret a decision to stay silent,” she told the newspaper.

A Disputed Dissertation

Mastriano’s dissertation and subsequent book, *Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne* (University of Kentucky Press, 2014), focused on World War I hero Sergeant Alvin York, who won the Medal of Honor after killing at least 20 German soldiers. York, who was drafted into the Army, initially started as a pacifist but then became convinced that God wanted him to fight.

James Gregory, a graduate student in history at the University of Oklahoma, detailed numerous factual errors in Mastriano’s book, including fraudulent citations, nearly a decade after it was published. Gregory told the *Inquirer* that he found 213 problems in the 480-page thesis, which was made public last month along with

Gregory detailed the book's errors in a March 2021 letter to the university's history department, Brown said, which led to an internal review of the dissertation.

"There were alarming charges of academic fraud—none of which surprised me," he said.

Brown said he raised "all the red flags I could" while serving as a member of the dissertation committee and was embarrassed to be part of it.

"His agenda is to make Sergeant York into a spiritual warrior like he is," Brown said.

Mastriano has pointed to his doctoral degree on the campaign trail "as evidence of his knowledgeability," according to the Associated Press. His campaign also pointed to the degree as a defense after Reuters published a photo of him wearing a Confederate uniform in a War College faculty photo. War College officials told the AP that the photo was taken down from a display because it doesn't represent the college's values.

Following news reports on the controversy, the University of New Brunswick acknowledged the questions circulating about the thesis and said it took seriously any allegation of research misconduct.

"As stated previously, UNB will review its internal processes and procedures to ensure our systems and policies around the awarding

of Ph.D.s remain of the highest standard,” the statement says. “This review will be conducted by two qualified independent academics and will begin as soon as possible. Our commitment to our students and the UNB community to continue to strive for nothing less than academic excellence in all we do has never wavered and will never diminish.”

Brown said reviewing the internal processes is not good enough. He wants to see Mastriano’s dissertation reviewed.

Not doing so undermines the university’s reputation, he said.

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